

Jewish Architects – Jewish Architecture?

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Ulrich Knufinke & Mirko Przystawik

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Fernbach's first major independent building was the Hebrew Orphan Asylum (1862–63) (fig. 1), the first significant structure of the wider New York Jewish community, erected after the merger of the Hebrew Benevolent Society and German Hebrew Benevolent Society. Designed in the *Rundbogenstil*, which had become popular for religious and public buildings in New York in the mid-nineteenth century, the brick and brownstone edifice was praised as both architecturally ornamental as well as functional. The *Mogen David* was prominently displayed on the gables of the front wings, identifying the building as a Jewish institution. The contemporary Jewish press praised the architect, noting, "We may well be proud of him as a coreligionist, proving practically that the Israelite is not to be set down as incapable of acquiring eminence in art."⁸



1 New York, Hebrew Orphan Asylum (1863–64), 77th Street and Third Avenue, arch.: Henry Fernbach; demolished (Reprinted from Manual of the Corporation of New York (New York, 1870), p. 445).

2 New York, Temple Emanu-El (1866–68), Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street, archs.: Leopold Eidlitz and Henry Fernbach; demolished (Reprinted from The American Architect and Building News 18, no. 514 (October 31, 1885)).



3 New York, B'nai Jeshurun Synagogue (1864–65), 145 West 34th Street, arch.: Henry Fernbach; demolished (Reprinted from 125th Anniversary, 1825–1950 – Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York City (New York, [1950?]) (Courtesy of Yeshiva University Library).



Fernbach, Eidlitz, and Temple Emanu-El

In the mid-1860s Fernbach joined Leopold Eidlitz (1823–1908), an older and more prominent architect, to build a new house of worship for the Reform Temple Emanu-El (1866–68) (fig. 2), which became the congregation of choice for many of New York's elite German Jewish families. The largest and costliest of all the Jewish synagogues erected in the United States up to that time, Emanu-El was a monument to the wealth, social position, and liberal ideals of its members – some of whom counted among Fernbach's clients. As their only known joint project, Eidlitz and Fernbach may have agreed to collaborate rather than compete, or Emanu-El's lay leadership may have asked them to work together. As was customary for such undertakings, the building committee invited four other firms to submit plans. Besides Eidlitz and Fernbach, only Alexander Saelzler (1814–83) had previously designed a synagogue.⁹ That Eidlitz and Fernbach were selected suggests the ambitiousness of the undertaking.

Eidlitz and Fernbach had each previously completed important synagogue commissions. Eidlitz, with his former partner Charles Blesch, had executed the Wooster Street Synagogue (1846–47) for Shaaray Tefila, and designed the liturgical furnishings for Emanu-El (1847–48) after it had acquired a former church.¹⁰ More recently, Fernbach had designed a new synagogue for B'nai Jeshurun (1864–65) (fig. 3), New York's second oldest congregation.¹¹ His use of the Germanic Rundbogenstil at B'nai Jeshurun, dedicated in 1865, demonstrated his awareness of earlier architectural debates on the appropriate style for a synagogue.¹² Fernbach had remodeled churches for Jewish houses of worship and, while working on Emanu-El, was also responsible for an interior renovation of Saelzler's mid-century Gothic-Revival Norfolk Street Synagogue, the oldest purpose-built synagogue still standing in New York. With the addition of an organ and family pews, Fernbach's refurbishment of Anshe Chesed reflected the reforming tendencies of a majority of its congregants.¹³

As for the question of who was the first Jewish architect in the United States – Eidlitz or Fernbach? – recent scholarship has confirmed that Eidlitz was born and raised Jewish in Prague.¹⁴ An article from 1847 describing his Shaaray Tefila synagogue acknowledged that "one of the architects, Mr. Eidlitz," was "an Israelite."¹⁵ However, Arnold Brunner, the leading American-Jewish architect of the next generation, in an article in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901), noted that, "Several synagogues were built in New York by the late Henry Fern-



4 New York, Proposed Parsonage for Temple Emanuel (1877), arch.: Henry Fernbach; unexecuted. Perspective rendering by D. A. Gregg (Reprinted from The American Architect and Building News 2, no. 69 (April 21, 1877)).



6–9 Subotica, town hall, exterior, interior, and detail (1908–10), archs.: Dezső Jakab, Marcell Komor (Photo by the author, 2020).

ing the style of the Hungarian Secession for public buildings. This may be seen as a first attempt by a state to “regulate” architectural style, decades before Adolf Hitler promoted “National Socialist Classicism” and the Soviet Zhdanov doctrine

prescribed “Social Realism” as a leading style for the artistic and architectural production in Communist states. Indirectly, both Hitler and Zhdanov thought to fight Jewish influence as they associated high modernism with Jewification.¹⁶

Despite the parliamentary ban, the *elzsidósodás/Verjudung* went on unhindered. Moreover, the Jewish entrepreneurial middle class favored Hungarian art nouveau for their apartment blocks and villas in opposition to the conservative political establishment, as in Vienna, suggested by Carl Schorske.¹⁷

In territories of the Hungarian Kingdom inhabited by national minorities, as for instance today in Vojvodina and Transylvania, this style figured as a defense of Hungarian nationhood, represented by city halls in Subotica (formerly Szabadka) and Târgu Mureș (formerly Marosvásárhely).

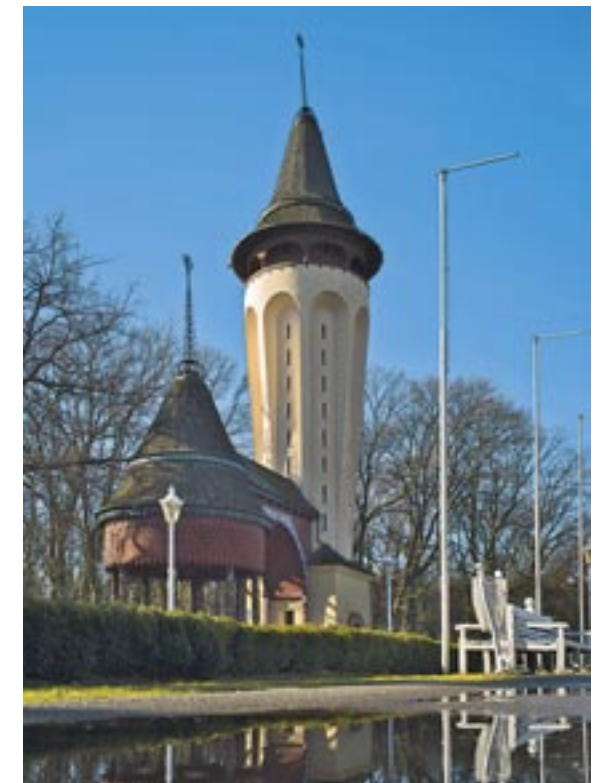
“Jewish-Hungarian Style” as Blasphemy. Condemnations from Jewish Side

Some critics considered the Jewish free picking and combining elements of Hungarian folklore heritage as a lack of appreciation for the host nation’s culture and in extreme cases even blasphemy. Interestingly, these voices came not only from within the ranks of gentiles, but from conservative Jewish intellectuals, too, like Simon Meller,¹⁸ who insisted on the use of the oriental style – absolutely obsolete by 1900 – for synagogues and Jewish community edifices instead of the “Jewish-Hungarian style.”

Commenting on the entries submitted for the new synagogue in Budapest’s affluent Lipótváros quarter Meller wrote:

However, to the innocent concoction of this style-mixing kitchen [that is, the Eclecticizing Free Style entries or some form of orientalism] a poison showed up: The Hungarian national style – the deadly peril of our young architecture – also reared its head in this competition. A completely insignificant, distasteful plan obtained the second prize in the competition, obviously because its style is supposedly a Hungarian national one.¹⁹ No word can condemn hard enough this artistic misguidance. There is no Hungarian national architectural style and it has never existed, just as Italian, French or German national styles. The architecture of modern nations has developed as one; there was European Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture, and various nations, including Hungary, were satisfied with second-order regional elements. Only those nations have a separate style which are far away from European culture²⁰ and Hungary does not want to be one of them. Only false patriotism may aim to create a Hungarian style that would be the very opposite of all Hungarian cultural efforts from King Stephen I

to Széchenyi.²¹ Anyway, it is impossible to create an architectural style from some poor Sekler (Székely) gates, tulip-decorated chests or felt cloaks and even if we had a traditional architectural style, we should not use it in the buildings of today. We would preserve its memory with reverence, but would join other parts of Europe, and we would try to develop only a Hungarian tone of European culture. This is the sensibly perceived duty of Hungarian art.²²



10 Palic, Main Entrance (Water Tower) (1910), archs.: Dezső Jakab, Marcell Komor (Photo by the author, 2020).



14 Storage structure for a Pardess orange farm, 1930s (Courtesy of the Weltsch Family Archive, Tel Aviv/Haifa/Eilat, Israel).

In his next large-scale project in Palestine, Weltsch collaborated with architect Max Loeb (1901–62), another immigrant from Germany.²⁸ The project involved the construction of a building for Pardess, the Cooperative Society of Orange Growers, which had to meet the needs of the increasing export of oranges through the Haifa port. In 1935, Loeb won an architectural competition for planning the building, which comprised storage halls and was situated in the reclaimed port area.²⁹ The modern building was equipped with state-of-the-art orange-storage technologies. It covered an area of about 7,000 m² and was the largest building ever built in Haifa (figs. 12–13).³⁰ After completing the project, Weltsch continued planning for Pardess additional storage structures for orange crates on the train piers of Binyamina, Pardes Hanna, Rehovot and Hadera (all Jewish orange-growing

towns) (fig. 14). In 1937, Weltsch and architect Shmuel Rozov planned together bonded warehouses for Levant Bonded Warehouses Co. Ltd., facing the Pardess building in Haifa (fig. 15). Later on, Weltsch collaborated with Max Loeb on the planning of residential houses on Mount Carmel (fig. 17). He designed school buildings and various buildings in Kibbutzim as well (fig. 16).

During World War II, construction in Palestine came to an almost complete halt. In the war years, Weltsch served as a technical A. R. P. officer and was engaged in planning shelters for Haifa residents by adding concrete linings to apartment building staircase walls (fig. 18). After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Weltsch collaborated with architect Shraga (Friedrich) Rohatyn who had immigrated to Palestine from Ukraine in 1936. Together, they planned residential houses and an old-people's home (Beit Yules) in Haifa, as well as bus stations in Kiryat Haim, Tveria, Afula and Kiryat Shmona (fig. 19). Weltsch went on planning plants such as the Hadera Paper plant, the first of its kind built in Israel (late 1950s), and Kitan Textile in Dimona (early 1960s).



15 Haifa Harbour, Levant Bonded Warehouse, 1937 (Courtesy of the Weltsch Family Archive, Tel Aviv/Haifa/Eilat, Israel).



16 Modern school building in Kibbutz, 1930s (Courtesy of the Weltsch Family Archive, Tel Aviv/Haifa/Eilat, Israel).



17 Modern residential house on Mount Carmel, 1930s (Courtesy of the Weltsch Family Archive, Tel Aviv/Haifa/Eilat, Israel).

Promoting modern construction technologies in Palestine

Throughout his career in Palestine, Weltsch introduced contractors and builders to new work methods in construction. The large-scale construction of the Levant Fair was an opportunity for him to integrate innovative building methods that were known to him from his rich experience in Hamburg. Weltsch pointed out that intention of his in every comment he issued about the Fair: “We all made an effort to find new ways and introduce them to Eretz Yisrael builders, so that the very construction of the Levant Fair would serve them as a building exhibition.”³¹ In November 1933, Weltsch gave a lecture at the annual conference of the Palestine Engineers and Architects Association, describing the problems he had encountered in constructing the Levant Fair buildings and the need to change the existing methods.³² To advance his ideas, he published them in the daily press, claiming that the building methods must be adjusted to the local climate and to the financial capabilities of the Jewish community in Palestine. In a comprehensive article on building methods, insulation materials, and lightweight prefabricated construction panels he had successfully used in the Levant Fair, he urged the decision-makers to be open minded and adopt innovation in construction:

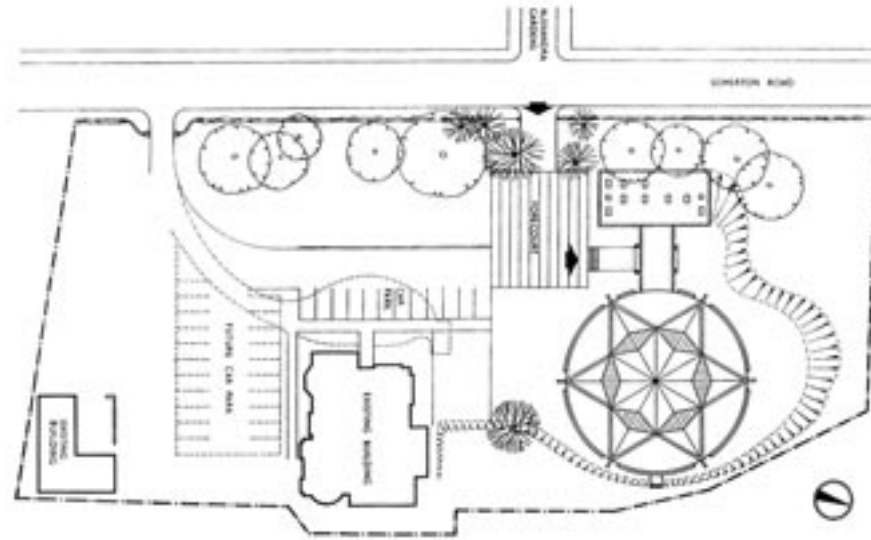
Within a short period of time, the new building style has been adopted by the entire cultural world, while the technical achievements of construction have been spreading very slowly ... Fear of the new must be overcome. The proprietor, the architect, the contractor must dare use in practice whatever has been found to be suitable in theory ...³³

Weltsch continued advancing the construction technology in Palestine later in his professional career. In 1935, he planned with his partner Heinemann and architect Loeb modular residential buildings with a steel skeleton frame, and contacted potential clients in Germany who were planning to immigrate.³⁴ The apartment buildings' modular structure was based on prototypes produced by the Berlin steel works Böhler and advertised in their Palestine catalogue. However, this innovative plan was never realized.

Although construction almost stopped in Palestine during the War, discussions were underway to determine the needs of the Jewish community towards building renewal once the war was over. Here, too, Weltsch was actively involved. In 1944, he was one of the organizers of The Exhibition of



7–8 Belfast, Synagogue (1961–64), arch.: Eugene Rosenberg of Yorke, Rosenberg, Mardall (YRM), exterior (Courtesy of the SJBH; photo by Nigel Corrie) and site plan (Reprinted from Architects' Journal Information Library (March 16, 1966)).



9 Belfast, Synagogue (1961–64), arch.: Eugene Rosenberg of Yorke, Rosenberg Mardall, ceiling (Courtesy of the SJBH; photo by Nigel Corrie).

In 1956–57 the practice designed a six-storey block in the West End of London (on the corner of Montagu Place and Upper Montagu Street, Marylebone, W1) to house Jews' College.⁴⁵ This rabbinical seminary had been set up in the mid-nineteenth century (1855) to train a native Anglo-Jewish ministry, but had never enjoyed a purpose-built home. The new block had a Portland stone-faced frontage but was constructed on a concrete-frame. The complex contained a library of rare books and manuscripts, classrooms, lecture halls, offices, flats and a small synagogue for sixty people, the actual appearance of which seems to have gone unrecorded. Unfortunately, this permanent home lasted less than thirty years, being very profitably sold in 1984: it is now the Swedish Embassy.

Rosenberg was also responsible for perhaps the most important synagogue built in Britain after the Second World War: at Somerton Road, Belfast in Northern Ireland (1961–64) (fig. 7).⁴⁶ This commission probably arose out of contacts in Northern Ireland made during his long involve-

ment with the Altnagelvin Hospital (1948–60) near Londonderry, his first major hospital project and the first built for the British National Health Service. It is unlikely to have come from involvement with the Jewish community; Rosenberg had “married out” at Fulham Registry Office in 1946.⁴⁷

Rosenberg's structural engineer on the Belfast project was Viennese-born Felix Samuely,⁴⁸ who had worked with Erich Mendelsohn in both Berlin and London, where he too had to reestablish himself after 1933. It took an American architectural historian, Carol Krinsky, to appreciate the significance of Belfast in 1985,⁴⁹ while the present writer must take the credit for making the successful application to List this synagogue as a national monument in 2015. Belfast is only the third post-Second World War synagogue in Britain yet added to the National Register of Buildings of outstanding architectural or historical significance.⁵⁰

In a landscaped setting, the grey and brick concrete shell of Belfast Synagogue is circular and blind, save a few vertical strip windows. The curved walls

contrast strongly with the attached single-storey rectilinear entrance block; solids and voids are sharply delineated. The drum-shaped shell masks the star-shaped plan of the prayer hall, which is not visible from the street, but only from the inside and from the air (fig. 8). This was the first application of the *Magen David* plan in Britain, and nowhere else has it been executed with such subtlety as at the prototype in Belfast.

The interior at Belfast is light and airy despite the sparse fenestration, thanks to the glazed clerestory beneath the Star of David ceiling (fig. 9). Lined in pinewood, the ceiling is supported by chunky concrete beams and rises upwards over the circular space, suggestive of a “tent,”⁵¹ but it was the striking star that proved to be its most influential feature. The architect's drawings confirm the bold geometric scheme of hexagon enclosed in a circle.⁵²

In the United States in the 1950s designers were experimenting with the hexagonal, centrally-planned auditorium. Frank Lloyd Wright's innovative Beth Shalom Synagogue (1954–57), Elkins Park, Phila-

delphia, was built on a modified hexagon. Geographically, Ireland is closer to America than is mainland Britain, and links with the New World date back to the mass migrations in the nineteenth century. However, we can only guess that Eugene Rosenberg was aware of such trans-Atlantic precedents.⁵³ Certainly, a project for a Reform Temple in Missouri (Temple Israel, Crève Coeur, Missouri, by Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum), was featured in the journal *Concrete Quarterly* in the autumn of 1963. It was based on a double hexagon plan, not dissimilar to Belfast.⁵⁴ Percival Goodman (1904–89), the most prolific synagogue architect in the world, also produced hexagon designs in New York State, for example, Temple Beth Emeth at Albany (1957).⁵⁵

Like Goodman, Rosenberg was interested in the integration of contemporary art into architecture.⁵⁶ He encouraged YRM's British clients to commission artwork, particularly abstract sculpture, from the likes of Henry Moore and Naum Gabo, to adorn their projects, both inside and out. He strongly believed in the benefits of public engagement with art. At

While Frommer's papers must be regarded as missing, we can learn something about the education gained by Cohn's student projects, which have been preserved. There are drawings for a Catholic church, a fire station, a Roman style villa, and a high school. She later referred to her training as "fusty," especially after the outbreak of World

War I when the majority of the male students and university teachers were fighting on the front and none of the older lecturers who had remained at the university drew the young women's attention to modernism. Marie Frommer received her degree in June 1916 and Lotte Cohn hers in December of the same year – in the middle of the war.

Lotte Cohn. The Zionist Architect

Having completed her studies, Lotte Cohn gained her first professional experience in East Prussia, where she was involved in the reconstruction of towns and villages that had been destroyed during World War I. As a Zionist she had the desire to take an active part in building the "Jewish home-

land." In 1919, she was the only woman among Zionist architects who were disposed to going to Palestine.⁴ In September 1921, at the age of 28, she went to Palestine as one of the first German Zionists of the Third Aliyah (1919–23) and was the first female architect in Eretz Israel.⁵

Assistantship and First Projects in Palestine

For the next six years (1921–27), Lotte Cohn worked as first assistant to architect Richard Kauffmann, the leading architect of the Palestine Land Development Company (PLDC) in Jerusalem. During that time, she was involved in planning the most important projects in the field of town planning, as well as architecture. Dozens of communal settlements of Kibbutzim and Moshavim were erected in Emek Yezreel as well as numerous garden suburbs and neighborhoods in Jerusalem and Haifa.⁶ Although the majority of the designs are attributed to Kauffmann, some also bear the signature of his assistant or are signed: "Planned by Richard Kauffmann; Co-operator: Lotte Cohn."

Her first single project in a cooperative settlement was the Agricultural Girl's School in Nahalal (fig. 2), which consisted of two buildings: the first House Aleph was erected on the left wing of Nahalal's entrance in 1925. Resources could only be provided ten years later for the second House Beth on the entrance's right wing. The Agricultural Girls' School was the first new public building in Mandatory Palestine.

In the 1920s, Cohn also took part in various architectural competitions for public buildings, among them the Beth Poalim (Workers' House, 1927) in Jerusalem. Stylistic influences of the De Stijl movement can be seen in her sketch. For the National Institution's Building (1928) in Jerusalem she submitted two different designs. None of these were realized.

2 Moshav Nahalal, buildings of the Agricultural Girls' School (1925/1935), arch.: Lotte Cohn (Author's collection).

